

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 686
Civil Actions – Child Sexual Abuse – Definition, Damages, and Statute of Limitations
(The Child Victims Act of 2023)
****SUPPORT****

TO: Hon. William C. Smith, Jr. Chair, and members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Matthew S. Wolf

DATE: February 23, 2023

My name is Matthew Wolf and I am a survivor of child sexual abuse. Such a simple sentence to share, only 14 words. You'd think it would be easy to say, but it has taken me nearly 30 years to find the courage to share my experience.

Sadly, the sexual abuse I endured is not unique. Although estimates vary across studies, we now know that one in four girls and at least one in 13 boys experience sexual abuse at some point in childhood. And if that number wasn't shocking enough, consider the fact that most likely it's a conservative estimate because the data is taken from participants who were willing to disclose their experiences. Consider also, the average age of disclosure of child sexual abuse in the U.S. is 52. That means countless adults have yet to tell anyone that they were sexually abused as a child — not their partners, not their friends, not their family members.

You may be hearing this and thinking, how can so many of our family and friends be carrying the pain of this trauma without us knowing? There are many reasons survivors carry this trauma alone. We know that developmentally, children simply do not have the emotional and cognitive skills to process traumatic experiences. As a result, children often either wait to report or never report child sexual abuse, even into adulthood.

I can't speak for all survivors, but I know that for many adults like myself, my abuse is a secret that weighs heavily. For many survivors, our abusers walk free or the institutions that enabled the abuse are not held accountable. Ultimately, I waited till my 40s to speak publicly about my abuse, because it is re-traumatizing to talk about what happened, and the idea of being vulnerable and opening up about the abuse is terrifying. But, the simplest explanation is that I was just not ready.

My abuse happened at the hands of a trusted coach/teacher. I was tricked into believing I was his only victim. I had to watch friends and my school community memorialize his

memory at his passing. Even after 30 years, I'm still a kaleidoscope of emotions on the topic: anger, disappointment, embarrassment, and fear. But I am finally ready to confront what happened to me.

Now imagine holding all those emotions in for 30 years, finally finding the strength to come forward to try and hold accountable those responsible, only to be told: "You waited too long," "We're sorry, but too much time has passed," and "Why didn't you bring this up sooner?"

Reforming the civil statute of limitations is critically important for survivors of abuse (like myself) because we all heal at different speeds. This isn't like a broken leg where there is an understood timeline to repair. Sexual abuse impacts us all in different ways, so allowing men and women to make the transition from victim to survivor at their own speed (when they are ready) is the compassionate and morally justice course of action. For these reasons, I respectfully urge a favorable report on SB 686.